JCC 4 (1) pp. 57–64 Intellect Limited 2010

Journal of Chinese Cinemas
Volume 4 Number 1
 doi: 10.1386/jcc.4.1.57/7

RU-SHOU ROBERT CHEN
National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Bazin at work: the concept of realism in Chinese-language films

ABSTRACT

The year 2008 marks the 90th birth anniversary of André Bazin, and the 50th anniversary of his death. This essay examines retrospectively how the legacy of Bazin's realist film theory has affected Chinese-language cinemas, in terms of theoretical exploration and evolution of film language and aesthetics, as exemplified by works by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou. I conclude by reflecting on the reasons why we still need Bazin today, especially for the Chinese-language films, in order to understand reality through the lens of cinema.

KEYWORDS

André Bazin
Realism
Hou Hsiao-Hsien
Tsai Ming-Liang
Chen Kaige
Zhang Yimou

INTRODUCTION

The year 2008 was the year of Andre Bazin, marking the 90th anniversary of his birth. Coincidentally, he died exactly half-century ago, at a relatively young age of 40 (1918–1958). People would love to remember his life, rather than his death, for the number 90 much better represents Bazin's life-long passion for cinema. One wonders, indeed, what he might have written about cinema and about the developments of film studies, were he still alive today.

Dudley Andrew, the key person introducing Bazin's works to the Anglophone world, summarizes the importance of Bazin in film studies as follows (1976: 134):

> Andre Bazin's impact on film art, as theorist and critic, is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer in the history of the cinema. He is credited with almost single-handled establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit.

And on Bazin's contribution to film theory (1976: 136):

> Bazin based his criticism on the films actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and film theory for the first time became a matter not of pronouncement and prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction.

In short, Bazin's theory of cinema is simple, but complex, which may be thus summed up: 'The essence of film from the very start has been a quest for the realism of the image.' Bazin has great confidence in film because it shows us things as they are.

Many film scholars today, structuralists and post-structuralists alike, seem too easily to dismiss Bazin's realist approach as mythical humanism, bourgeois idealism, or reactionary essentialism. Against those indictments I will argue that we still need Bazin now as much as his time after the World War Two. His affirmation of the objectivity of the cinema is especially crucial in the age of the digital revolution. The purpose of this essay is, therefore, to elaborate on Bazin's concept of realism and adopt his ideas to illuminate an analysis of films from Taiwan and China, namely films by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou.

REALISM IN TIME

Filmic images for Bazin are some kind of a double of the world. They are reflections of the physical world petrified in time. He expounded the idea of the mummy complex and explained that for ancient Egyptians, by turning corpses into mummies, people's lives would be preserved and held against the flow of time and, ultimately, against death. Cinema, like the mummy, can claim victory over the loss of time because they both are representations of life. For Bazin, 'Everything that is filmed once was in reality;' it is the cinema that brought images back to life.

However, in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," Bazin (1967: 27) makes a rather different claim about the importance of time to represent reality. He discusses a sequence in *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), when Nanook is seal hunting. What matters to Flaherty, according to Bazin, is the relationship between Nanook and the animal. So the actual duration of time for Nanook to lie down and wait before he strikes is the very substance of the image, as if the audiences were right beside Nanook during the whole length of time. We feel and share with Nanook the excitement of actual hunting time.

Tsai Ming-Liang employs very similar cinematic expression. He believes that time is as real as image. Therefore, to show that a character is waiting for

a long period of time while smoking five cigarettes, he would use the exact length of time to shoot that character smoking five cigarettes. He would not cheat time by showing five cigarette butts inside an ashtray. The passage of time is a crucial factor in the ending sequence of *Aiqing wansui/Vive L'amour* (Tsai, 1994). It starts with the female protagonist Yang walking into the then unfinished Daan Forest Park. The camera follows her aimless walk, passing through dirt and construction materials, until she finds a long bench to sit on. It then cuts to a bust shot of her while she starts crying hysterically. She cries for more than five minutes and the camera never moves. Tsai Ming-Liang conveys her helplessness through this five-minute long take which, as Bazin would no doubt agree, is much more moving than using cut and edit to save time.

Zhang Yimou's early work *Ju-Dou* (1990), on the other hand, adopts a different strategy to represent the passage of time. After the old Master's death in the film, the ancient rule for this ritual requires that both his widow and niece stop the coffin forty-nine times to show their loyalty. In this sequence, the widow (Gong Li) and the nephew (actually her lover in the film) are shown kneeling before the coffin and trying in vain to stop the coffin, because people would come up to take them away. And they rush back to do it over and over again. In this three-minute sequence, the camera captures their frustration and exhaustion by changing positions constantly – behind their backs, lying under the coffin as they do, rushing to the front of the coffin, and so on. Later the camera speed slows down gradually, as if they are cursed to do in infinite repetition, just like Sisyphus condemned forever to pushing a stone uphill.

There is another famous scene dealing with the realistic representation of time. In the opening sequence of *A Fei zhengzhuan/Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1990), Leslie Cheung character asks Maggie Cheung to look at his wrist-watch. She does and the camera stays still for one minute, while the clicking sound of clock is heard off screen. After that Leslie says to Maggie: 'From now on we are friends for one minute. This is a fact. You can't retreat. [Because] It's accomplished.' Here Wong seems to pay homage to Flaherty, à la Bazin, for his faithful treatment of temporal reality in cinema.

REALISM IN SPACE

Bazin believes that the realistic portrayal of space can contribute to the social and psychological truth of the event depicted. The filmic space is organized by the frame and the ideal coordinates of its dramatic geometry. And activities take place in the three-dimensional space. Bazin claims, 'The camera cannot see

everything at once but it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see.' (1967: 33)

No one illustrates Bazin's concept of space better than Hou Hsiao-Hsien. *Erzi de da wan'ou/The Sandwich Man* (1983) begins with a long and deep-focus shot, lasting thirty seconds. A 'sandwich' man appears from the far side of horizon, but only his upper body can be seen, dwarfed by huge street billboards behind him. He keeps walking toward the camera but, no matter how long he walks, the distance between him and the camera does not change very much, His small body continues to be engulfed by street signs in the background. This establishing shot does not indicate specific time and place of the story, but it reveals the universal conditions in which the underprivileged face enormous oppression and prejudices in society.

Chen Kaige, on the other hand, composes an innovative frame of shots in *Huang tudi/Yellow Earth* (1984) to reflect upon the relationship between characters and their environment, the Yellow Earth Plateau. The film is about a communist soldier collecting folk songs in a remote region, where he stays in a poor peasant's house and befriends his two children. The Yellow Earth Plateau has been considered the birthplace of Chinese civilization, but it is the poorest area in China today. Even so, the Yellow Earth Plateau is a special wonder on the Planet Earth, which is like a huge chunk of thick soil piling directly on this land. It is so barren that there is no tree growing on it and there is only sky above it. Chen wants to visualize the idea of 'high heaven, thick earth' by showing in a stunning scene the peasant standing up to pray to the Heaven. The low angle camera shot positions him as if he was not standing on solid ground. But after he sits down, the reverse high angle shot corners him on the ground, as if there was no sky above him.

These two extreme shots violate what is usually known as the 'Golden Ratio' composition, dictating that the upper and the lower parts of a picture are well-proportioned, roughly in 1:1.618 ratio It is also a fundamental aesthetic element for Western painting, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. But in *Yellow Earth*, it is intended to portray heaven and earth by such unique but effective camera positions.

REALISM IN MISE-EN-SCENE

When praising *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), Bazin proclaims that the film 'is unthinkable [to be] shot in any other way but in depth.' (1997: 234) Here he refers to Orson Welles' mise-en-scene in the film. For Bazin, mise-en-scene is the foundation of film art. It represents true continuity and reproduces realistic situations. With deep focus, the story and the actors are presented at their clearest and most powerful.

Bazin's example is the scene when Susan Alexander Kane commits suicide. A big glass and a teaspoon block the foreground while a woman's (Susan) face lies a little farther back. There is a door at the far end of the background, where, seconds later, Kane will burst into the room to save his wife.

Speaking against using classical cutting of four or five shots to depict the 'dramatic overload of the image,' Bazin comments (1997: 234; emphasis mine),

> This single shot, then, is built in depth around two dramatic centers of gravity, each consisting of sonorous and visual elements. One sees immediately the use Welles has made of his lens by putting the *desert* of the bedroom between the bed and the door.

Hou Hsiao-Hsien incorporates Bazin's realistic representation of mise-en-scene into his film *Fenggui lai de ren/Boys from Fengkuei* (1983). Furthermore, Hou breaks open the confine of screen frame and includes the off-screen space into mise-en-scene. In "Theater and Cinema," Bazin writes (1967: 105),

> The screen is not a frame like that of a picture but a mask (cache) which allows only a part of the action to be seen. When a character moves off screen, we accept the fact that he is out of sight, but he continues to exist in his own capacity at some other place.

In *Fengkuei*, there is a scene with two groups of young men fighting each other. The camera is positioned in the middle, facing directly toward the end of an alley, where the fighting takes place. After it starts, one group pursues another and both exit the screen on the left-hand side. Then the same two groups return from the left side, running across the place and exit, this time, on the right side. The camera does not move at all and the screen now looks like an empty shot. Ten seconds later, they enter from the right side again and the fighting continues, until the camera cuts to the next shot.

The main interest in this scene is that ten-second empty shot, because the fighting does not take place in front of the camera, but somewhere off screen. We do not witness it but can only imagine what is happening outside the frame.

For Bazin, the function of mise-en-scene is not to add something to reality, but to reveal that reality, including all its cruelty and ugliness. Tsai Ming-Liang in *Heliu/The River* (1997) illustrates this point without ever flinching. The climax of the film is that a father and his son have a sexual encounter in a gay bathhouse without knowing their blunder – until the very last moment of the scene. The whole sequence lasts fifteen minutes, starting from the son cruising in the dark corridor, opening and closing doors to find a potential mate, just like other gay men do. It takes him ten minutes to find a man who is willing to take him in a darken room. And they make love. While the lighting is kept almost dark, the camera stands still to witness, as we do, the incestuous scene. When his passion is over, the father turns on the light, only to find out the 'naked' truth. All he can think of is to slap his son's face. As a director who puts his faith in reality, Tsai needs not add nor explain such a sensational topic; he just shows it.

REALISM IN THE REFLECTION OF EVENT

Bazin (1971: 72) believes that 'the cinema more than any other art is particularly bound up with love.' When commenting on *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) by Charles Chaplin, he points out that the film has 'a necessary and dialectic relationship to love.' To that, however, he adds that 'cruelty is not always excluded from this world.' From this notion, we may turn to analyze *Tianbian yiduo yun/The Wayward Cloud* (2005) by Tsai Ming-Liang.

The final sequence of *The Wayward Cloud* juxtaposes love and cruelty while blurring the line between pure acting and pornography. The female protagonist Shiang-Chyi walks to a window and discovers that Hsiao-Kang is working for a porn movie by making love to a Japanese porn actress, who is in a comatose state. Standing by the grids through which she watches the action in process, Shiang-Chyi begins moaning, as if voicing the orgasm for the porn actress. Many shots/reverse shots alternate from Shiang-Chyi to Hsiao-Kang, suggesting a virtual sexual intercourse between the two. Right before Hsiao-Kang reaches his climax, he launches to the window, takes Shiang-Chyi's head, and 'presumably' puts his penis in her mouth. The next shot is shocking, if also cruel. We see a tight close-up of Shiang-Chyi's face, with Hsiao-Kang's penis seemingly stuffing into her open mouth. After some excruciatingly long ninety seconds, a tear slowly rolls down her face.[1]

DIGITAL REALISM: A NEW DIRECTION?

Let me conclude this essay by quoting Andrew once more (1976: 178):

> Bazin's theory will continue to have enormous impact because of its strength and variety. Its strength results from the consistency of his views … The variety … comes from the fertility and energy of a man who was drawn to investigate everything he encountered and for whom every encounter inevitably revealed some new truth.

Even so, one might wonder if Bazin's 'myth of total cinema' (cinema as a total and complete representation of reality) is still valid in the digital age. He claims that '[f]or the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.' While other arts are based on the presence of man, such as the painter towards his work, the advent of photograph and cinema emphasizes his absence.

Will it be the same when facing digital cinema? Or, to put it another way, does the concept of digital realism exist for digital cinema? Lev Manovich does not think so. In his influential article "What is Digital Cinema?" Manovich defines digital cinema as 'a particular case of animation which uses live action footage as one of its many elements.'[2] Furthermore, what he calls live action footage is not the final stage, but raw material to be manipulated by hand in postproduction,

1. The reason I use "seemingly" here is because no one, including director Tsai and the two actors involved, admits that the fellatio really happens.
2. Quoted from http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/6/6110/2.html. Accessed 8 August 2009.

for example, adding special effects and computer animation elements. Bazin's belief that everything audiences see on screen is real, therefore, does not apply anymore. *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) is a case in point.

I will agree, however, with Andrew that the realist legacy of cinema persists. The digital camera is like any other previous camera that, when operating, captures nothing but things in front of it. There is no human intervention between what is filmed and the digital image. Or, as Bazin (1967: 14) would insist, both kinds of cameras transfer 'reality from the thing to its reproduction.' The major difference lies in the fact that digital camera first puts the image into bits and bytes before any manipulation and transformation start.

But one thing is for sure: no matter how an image is created or manipulated, there is always the purpose of making a film feel 'real' for movie audiences. The sense of live and immediacy is what affects them. Furthermore, cinema is an art of story-telling, conveyed through narrative, cinematography, and mise-en-scene. The recent success of *Haijiao qi hao/Cape No. 7* (Wei Te-sheng, 2008) in Taiwan fully demonstrates this point. It is the love story between a Taiwanese boy and a Japanese girl, and the interactions among characters, marking the film the highest box office success (exceeding 500 million NT Dollars) in the history of Taiwan cinema. One main reason for this phenomenon is because audiences believe the story to be realistic, a story that either really happened before, or can happen to them anytime now. Therefore, digital or not, Bazin's myth of total cinema is still alive in the digital age, maybe more so than it ever was.

WORKS CITED

Andrew, J. Dudley (1976), *The Major Film Theories*, New York: Oxford University, Press.

Bazin, Andre (1967), *What Is Cinema?* Vol.1 (trans. H. Gray), Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bazin, Andre (1971), *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2 (trans. H. Gray), Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bazin, Andre (1991), *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, (trans. A. Piette and B. Cardullo, ed. B. Cardullo), New York: Routledge.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Chen, R.-S. R. (2010), 'Bazin at work: the concept of realism in Chinese-language films', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4: 1, pp. 57–64, doi: 10.1386/jcc.4.1.57/7

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Robert Chen co-edited *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity, and State of the Arts* (Routledge, 2007) with Darrell Davis. His publication includes *The Cultural-Historical Experiences of Taiwan Cinema* and *Cinema Empire* (both in Chinese).

Contact: Department of Radio-TV, National Chengchi University, No. 64, Sec. 2, Chi-Nan Road, Wen-Shan District, Taipei, 116, Taiwan.
E-mail: cinema@ms13.hinet.net